

Some Comments on Folklore in the Mass Media

Tom Burn's recent article, "Folklore in the Mass Media: Television" raised a number of interesting points.¹ While I do not wish at this time to quarrel with the criteria presented in his introductory paragraph, several points in the subsequent analysis are worth further consideration.

We academics are very careful about our citations of books, but we tend to be sloppy about other media to which we refer. For example, Odum and Johnson and Newman Ivey White knew of "race" recordings of folksongs, but did not cite record numbers and companies or name performers when they discussed the recordings in their collections of Negro song. Only now, after the labors of Paul Oliver and the British blues discographers, are we cognizant of the fact that there was a finite number of recordings, and that each record company had a specific attitude toward the music and each singer a specific style and repertoire.² The same is no less true for television stations. Thus, giving the numbers of the channels watched constitutes inadequate documentation, for these are mechanical designations which remain fixed in spite of changes in station ownership. What really identifies a station is its call letters, which Burns has not identified. Call letters symbolize policy (sometimes, in fact, they are the initials of the owner or have some similar significance) and remind us that every kind of media attempts to establish a personality, an identifiable "image" which is symbolized by its trademark. This is a problem in documentation which may seem simple but which must be taken into account if future researchers are to have a point of reference for the study of style and content change in the mass media. Perhaps my comments on several of Burn's content evaluations will indicate the kinds of problems with which future researchers must deal.

In his discussion of fiddle music, Burn's misuse of the word "bluegrass" creates a misleading impression of polarization between tradition and non-tradition. The statement that "listen to the Mockingbird" has been a "sure crowd pleaser for bluegrass audiences" since it was written in 1855 is inaccurate.³ There was no bluegrass before 1939 at the very earliest; and bluegrass, even though it is non-electric, is as much a mixture of mass and folk culture as any country-western substyle.⁴ As I have pointed out elsewhere, bluegrass musicians tend to see themselves as representatives of a pure tradition, but this is a folk evaluation rather than a folkloristic judgment.⁵ Once the confusion about bluegrass is removed, the real problem with the example of "Mockingbird" becomes apparent.

It has been a popular tune with traditional fiddlers and their audiences for a long time. However, it has almost always been a "show" or "trick" tune rather than a dance tune. This means that as a folklore item its contextual features are and always have been different from those of its closest folklore relatives, dance tunes. Burns actually makes this distinction when he describes a festival situation--such as a fiddle contest or convention. Thus his point that these "show" or "trick" tunes fit well into the television context is well-taken. But the difference between the television performance and a traditional performance may in fact not be as great as Burns conceives it to be.

As I have stated above, bluegrass, while not electrified, is just as commercialized as any other part of country-western music. That statement could be reversed--country-western music, especially in its live

contexts, though electrified, is as traditional as most bluegrass in that it developed from rural vaudeville, the medicine show and black-face minstrelsy. Conversely, it is not uncommon to encounter completely traditional contexts in which the fiddle is electrified. Most of the square dances I have attended in Brown and Monroe counties, Indiana, had electric fiddle music--except those held at the Brown County State Park for the tourists, which had to be more "authentic."

If electrification is not a dependable criterion, the length of the performance will not help much either. The three "modern bluegrass" versions Burns used for comparison are actually representative of a spectrum of fiddle performances ranging from relatively uncommercialized folk tradition (Washburn) to contemporary Nashville Bluegrass (Martin). I would attribute the shortness of the television example (as contrasted with the recordings) to the limited amount of time allotted to the performers, coupled with a tendency in country-western music to devote more attention to songs than instrumentals. Thus the real question is, how would the same fiddler perform the same tune in country-western musical contexts such as bars, concerts, recordings or radio shows?

Burn's discussion of joke telling raises similar problems. It is true that most jokes are told in the traditional context described, the intimate conversational group. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that the situation described for Pat O'Brien's joke may be more traditional than it appears. O'Brien is not, as Burns points out, just a stand-up comedian, he is an ethnic character type. The ethnic comic figure has deep roots in American (and European) entertainment traditions and may thus be quite traditional in this context. However this may be, the question of the audience raises a much more basic problem.

When one examines television context, a number of levels can be discerned. Thus (to use Burns' example) in addition to the chatty little paracocktail party on screen during the Tonight show there is an off-screen studio audience and the viewing audience. Each constitutes a different kind of context; and the performer is aware of each level.

The existence of multiple contexts has a number of implications. The studio audience hears and sees things that the viewing audience does not hear and see. In the several live TV shows that I have attended, the MC ("emcee"), star and producer all helped "warm up" the audience and coach them in the proper reactions--when to applaud and laugh. But the studio audience does not know for sure if the various performer's lines are spontaneous or rehearsed, just as the viewing audience does not know if the show is filmed or live, and the audience reaction "canned" or real.

This leads to a more general criticism-- Burns has taken the audio and visual as received more or less at face value. My contention is that all aspects of staging, filming and editing must be considered in terms of their folkloristic content. Cartoons, for example, derive in techniques from movie cartoons, comic books and strips and, ultimately from folk puppetry. Most histories of mass media stress the innovations of people like Walt Disney, but the folklorist can see the continuities as well. However, the answers cannot be gleaned by watching the "tube" alone.

Because mass media are, as I have suggested, multi-contextual, the student must not only investigate the finished product, but must come to terms with the whole creative process. Assessing the appearance of "Sing a Song of Sixpence" in a margarine ad may involve tracking down the advertising agency and asking why they used a traditional song for their pitch. Correctly assessing the traditionality of "Listen to the Mockingbird" involves having some knowledge of what happens to the tune when played by the same musicians in other contexts.

I do not wish to suggest that such problems are overwhelming. In fact they are a challenge. For the folklorist the usefulness of the multi-context phenomena in mass culture lies in the fact that it tends to fragment the creative process, thus making it more accessible to us. All this may lead us away from "true" folklore events, but on the other hand, it may give us some perspective on creative processes in contemporary society.

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NOTES

- 1 Folklore Forum, II(1969), 90-105.
- 2 See John Godrich and R.M.W. Dixon, Blues and Gospel Records, 1902-1942, second edition (Bexhill-On-Sea, England, 1969).
- 3 Burns, 91.
- 4 See L. Mayne Smith, "An Introduction to Bluegrass," Journal of American Folklore, LXXVII(1965), 245-256; a more extended discussion by the same author is his unpublished Indiana University Master's Thesis, "Bluegrass Music and Musicians" (1964).
- 5 Neil V. Rosenberg, "From Sound to Style: The Emergence of Bluegrass," Journal of American Folklore, LXXX(1967), 148-9.
- 6 Constance Rourke's American Humor (New York, 1931) traces the development of such figures in early American stage traditions.

OUR READERS WRITE: "A THIRD WAY"

Dear Sirs:

So, do you expect us to believe that "A third way" just APPEARED one day? Mysteriously, you say? And it means nothing? Who do you think we are? Who do you think YOU are? Such Greenwaysque paranoia is not seemly.

Disappointedly,
A Reader

Dear Reader: The stencils for that issue were prepared by a trusted typist. Betwixt typing and printing they never left the hands of your truly baffled editors. The mimeographers have been in our employ for many long years. --EDS.